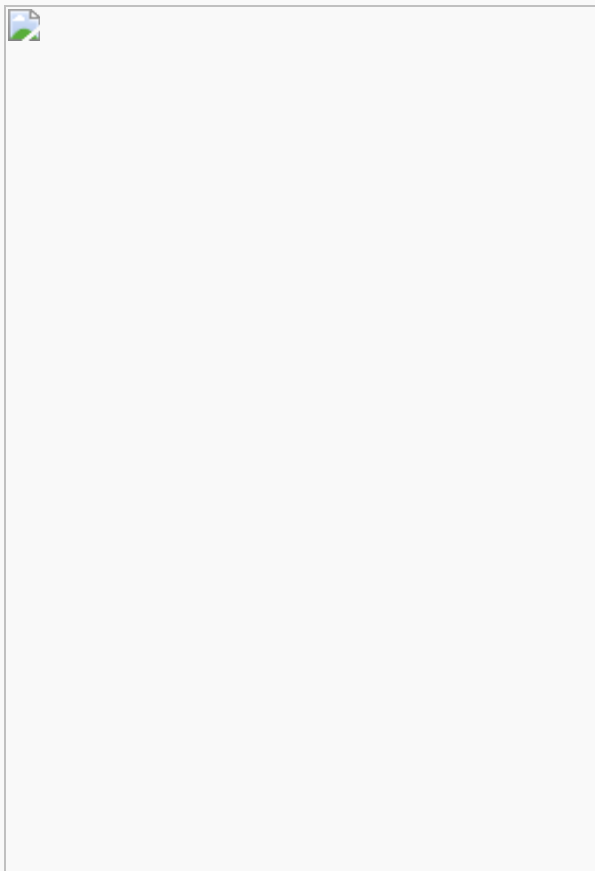


Natural Born Killers



Director: Oliver Stone

Shanghai Star. 2004-04-01

Starring: Rodney Dangerfield, Robert Downey, Woody Harrelson, Tommy Lee Jones, Juliette Lewis, Edie McClurg

Oliver Stone is a strong candidate for the world's most controversial director, and this movie, released in 1994, has an equally strong claim to be his most controversial film. Stone himself did this darkly comic masterpiece no favours with his unconvincing (and widely mocked) comments at the time, in which he attempted to "spin" it as a denunciation of media sensationalism.

In fact cynical sensationalism is the heart and soul of the movie, and Stone would have been better advised to stand by its reckless decadence and cinematic panache. "Natural Born Killers" is a celebration of visual aestheticism radically disconnected from moral purpose, blitzing the viewer through filters, genres and media formats to tell the deranged love-story of its all-American sociopathic antiheroes Mickey Knox (Harrelson) and Mallory Wilson (Lewis) as they cut a swathe of meaningless blood-letting across the country's highways and TV screens.

After murdering Mallory's abusive parents (Dangerfield and McClurg), Mickey and Mallory set out on a saga of random slaughter, soaking up adoration from the nation's serial-killer fans and media moguls. They are eagerly pursued by TV host Wayne Gale (Downey) who appreciates their audience-boosting power as celebrity criminals, and even after their capture media-

hungry prison chief Dwight McCluskey (Jones) ensures that the televisual circus continues. A ludicrously violent prison riot, organized by the two "natural born killers" even ensures that it escalates.

This minimalistic plot, along with the terse screenplay (by Quentin Tarrantino no less) and determinedly extravagant acting that support it, are mere pretexts for an orgy of visual delights rarely equalled in the history of film. It is not on the thin and morally absurd main plotline - over which innumerable critics have blustered equally absurdly - that the movie works its real magic, but in scenes such as the one set out in the desert, where the killers are taken in by a solitary Indian.

After Mickey shoots the hospitable stranger dead over some triviality, Mallory starts to cry "bad, bad, bad", like the inarticulate child she remains. Mickey tries to apologize, because he has upset the only person who is real to him. Then the idiot murderous lovers set out again across the desert, which has become a sea of rattlesnakes, bathed in unearthly colours and horrors.

Nick Land

Persuasion



Director: Roger Michell

Starring: Amanda Root, Ciaran Hinds, Susan Fleetwood, Corin Redgrave, Fiona Shaw, John Woodvine, Samuel West, Phoebe Nicholls, Simon Russell Beale, Sophie Thompson

"Persuasion" was Jane Austen's last novel and this film of the book may be the best to be made of any of her works. The director Roger Michell and his screenwriter Nick Dear appear to have thoroughly researched Austen's writings even to the extent of including in the movie - near the end - a chapter Austen had deleted from the novel but which was later found among her papers.

Michell also includes a very un-Austen-like scene in the film - an on-screen kiss (not in the book) in the streets of Bath between the heroine, Anne Elliot (Amanda Root) and her true love, Captain Wentworth (Ciaran Hinds). However, at least Hinds gets to keep his clothes on, unlike Colin Firth who was given an egregious nude scene in "Pride and Prejudice".

"Pride and Prudence" would have been a good title for "Persuasion" or "Pride and Reticence". The pride belongs to Captain Wentworth and the prudence to Anne Elliot. The reticence belongs to them both.

Anne had been persuaded to refuse to marry Wentworth eight years before the story begins when he was a promising, but penniless, young naval officer with no high social connections. Eight years later, when they meet again, he has his own command in the Royal Navy of the Napoleonic Wars and wealth through prizemoney but he has too much pride to renew his courtship of Anne.

In one of her letters about "Persuasion", Austen tells a friend that "you may perhaps like the heroine as she is almost too good for me". As played by Amanda Root, Anne Elliot is almost too good to be true. Anne is 27 years old when we meet her, on the verge of permanent spinsterhood, and she presents a face that is at once harried and severe.

In a story of lost love one may expect the heroine to look a little aggrieved and thin-lipped but Root manages throughout to walk the thin line between bathos and pathos perfectly and is the very ideal of an Austen heroine. She is resigned to the "martyrdom of spinsterhood" but avoids any hint of self-pity.

Hinds, last seen as a Dublin crook in "Veronica Guerin", plays Wentworth adroitly - he is stern but not haughty, reserved but not shy - and is the embodiment of grace under pressure as the various strands of the plot unfold.

Although we know it will all turn out all right in the end (being a Jane Austen story) we are kept worried that something will still go wrong. So many things seem to stand in the way of a happy resolution for the central couple, not least because of their mutual reticence to voice their true feelings. Michell has his two main characters do most of their acting (they hardly speak to one another) with body language - their eyes, a turn of the shoulders, a frown or a curl of the lip.

The supporting cast is excellent: Corin Redgrave is Anne's father, Sir Walter Elliot, a baronet and the biggest snob Austen ever breathed life into; Samuel West is the evil, cunning cousin, William Eliot; Phoebe Nicholls in Anne's silly and vain elder sister, Elizabeth; Simon Russell Beale is the family's huntin' and shootin' neighbour Charles Musgrove; and, Sophie Thompson is the hypochondriac younger sister, Mary, who is married to Charles.

Special mention should go to Fiona Shaw as Wentworth's sister, Sophy, the wife of Admiral Croft - who is played with admirable aplomb by John Woodvine - and to Susan Fleetwood as Lady Russell whose earlier "persuasion" of Anne not to marry Wentworth is the mainspring of the story.

Barry Porter

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